Briefing 2

What can be done within schools and colleges to support teacher wellbeing, and mitigate the factors which can cause problems with teacher mental health?

Rachel Mathieson, Chris Forde (Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change), Judith Hanks (Centre for Curriculum, Pedagogy and Practice, School of Education); University of Leeds

May 2020

Introduction

In our first [briefing note](#) (Hanks, Mathieson and Forde, 20200 published in April 2020, we reported on events hosted jointly by the School of Education and Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change (CERIC) at the University of Leeds to examine burnout and wellbeing in teaching. Three stakeholder forums held during the summer term of 2019 were attended by teachers, union representatives, school and college senior leaders, and human resource professionals.

A further roundtable was held in February 2020. In total, since Summer 2019, over 40 education professionals have participated in the project which is being conducted in partnership with the two largest teaching unions, the NEU and the NASUWT, and is funded in part by the Leeds Social Science Institute ESRC Impact Acceleration Account. The emphasis in the stakeholder meetings has been on listening to participants, gathering their insights on what they consider to be important issues.

The worsening exodus from teaching in the UK has been widely documented, with studies citing low wellbeing as a key contributing factor. However, the factors that specifically impact

upon the wellbeing of teachers are less well understood. In this second briefing, we focus on what teachers say enables them to feel supported in their professional lives and to maintain good mental health, considering evidence from schools and colleges which are being run and led in a way which seems to avoid many of the problems reported elsewhere. We present evidence from senior managers who say supporting and valuing their teachers is central to how they manage their schools, lead their staff and make decisions. We also include views from union representatives about their involvement with both individual teachers and organisations.

Developing a culture in which staff are valued

In our first briefing note, we identified workplace culture as a major influence on teacher wellbeing. Performance management and accountability systems are key contributors to the pressure teachers say they feel, which in turn can cause stress and anxiety. Teachers told us that they needed to feel valued, and that the performativity and audit culture has the reverse effect, making them feel as though they are being found at fault. Managers who have patience with their staff, and who allow expertise to develop over time and then value that expertise and experience, are much more likely to find their staff stay with the institution and teach confidently.

> 'I'm passionate about…the profession and about making it real and about valuing teachers and making sure that they are happy and that they do have a good work-life balance – most importantly, me. So, I do believe that if I'm happy and I've got a good work-life balance, then I'm going to, you know, it's that culture, isn't it, across the school.' Primary headteacher
>
> '…generally you can look at a school and how a school performs by the leadership that it has… that culture…of positive leadership….bringing staff on and encouraging them in the working environment that you can create.' Union official

Older and more experienced teachers report feeling especially vulnerable. A recurring view expressed in our stakeholder meetings is that experienced teachers are acutely aware that they are more expensive to employ, and they can therefore become targets within institutions which are under severe financial pressure. This phenomenon is confirmed by the unions from their experiences of case work. The loss of experienced teachers from the profession before they would normally retire is a worrying feature of the retention crisis, not

only for their own sake, but also and importantly from the perspective of newer teachers who benefit from discussion with their more experienced colleagues.

A second pinch point for teacher retention is the early career: a significant proportion of new teachers are leaving the profession within three or four years of joining. It is essential for leaders to understand that these early years can be make or break, and new teachers need to be supported and encouraged through this period of rapid learning and adjustment. One representative of a school-based teacher training alliance told us of the special efforts their organisation makes to support teachers in their first few years of the job. Historically, NQT status has covered only the first year of teaching, but there are moves to acknowledge that it is a good idea to support recently qualified teachers (RQTs) for several years. In 2019, the government produced an Early Career Framework[1] directed at teachers in their second year, funding 5% off timetable, following the 10% which applied in their first year, and mentoring from more experienced staff.

The kind of mentoring which more experienced staff can offer to those newer to the profession, whether on a formal or informal footing, is an example of the measures institutions can take to work towards establishing what one participant called a "steady ship", where staff turnover is minimal. Stability of the school community, of a team learning and developing together, is necessary for good morale and healthy well-being. Successful leadership is about building that steady ship, having a shared vision, listening to staff, and having confidence in the teachers and what they are doing in their classrooms.

Beyond sticking plaster initiatives

[1] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/773705/Early-Career_Framework.pdf

Wellbeing is not tackled, our participants felt, through what they referred to as the sticking plaster initiatives being introduced into schools, as into other organisations – the bowl of fruit or chocolates in the staffroom and the yoga classes after school – but through the systemic and structural processes and expectations of the school as they are experienced every day by teachers and which are at the heart of teachers' work. There needs to be clarity over expectations and policies, so that aspects of school life such as the directed time budget are in place and allow teachers to feel comfortable with what is expected of them. Policies around issues such as marking and email burdens should be devised in conjunction with staff, to take account of their concerns, views and suggestions, and to keep staff feeling in control of their own work.

'They've [staff] got some good perceptions. Ask them regularly. Being human. …I think that we consult well with staff… in the school improvement plan, then, staff can see their ideas, what they wanted, students can see it, the parents forum contribute, so that that's how you get the buy into the community.' Secondary headteacher

'I've got some really, super outstanding …teachers, who've been there quite some time now and they are so committed to that school…they're not all part of my senior leadership team…[but] they're all part of the school development plan. The school development plan isn't written by me in my office in August; it's written by every member of the teaching staff has an input in it. So that you've got the buy-in…then as your new teachers arrive, they going to get fantastic mentoring, aren't they? And coaching.' Primary headteacher

Senior leaders told us they felt it was important to think carefully about how much responsibility to give to teachers at different stages of their career, and also to take into account teachers' domestic and/or caring responsibilities, and individual capacity and ambition. They said they realised that not all teachers wanted to be promoted: it is crucial to recognise brilliant classroom teachers, rather than expecting promotion into middle and senior management to be everyone's aspiration. Expecting the same from every teacher or from every school is inappropriate: senior leaders told us they felt that they needed to consider each teacher individually in order to look after their well-being. One senior leader described this as "having their [the teachers'] backs". It is also important to "be human", as one leader put it, and recognise that teachers have a life outside the classroom. Indeed, some senior leaders told us they tried to lead by example, by not being the last to leave the car park at night, going home at a reasonable time because they were going to the gym or having a night out with friends.

> 'It's a highly skilled profession,… and if you do it really well, and you, and you make it simple and you give the teachers good structure, good support, time, leadership, but you allow them to have creativity, job's a good un, isn't it?' Primary headteacher
>
> 'I set the example, I very rarely go into work in the holidays. I'm blooming attached to this thing, but, but I always say to the staff, these are our holidays, we deserve them, we work really hard. They're [teachers] not [burning out] because I actually say these are your holidays, go and spend time with your friends and your family and your loved ones because that's more important than, than any job, so, you know, this is about your mental health, isn't it? So….I set the example; I'm going away for three weeks.' Primary headteacher
>
> 'Your mood, your behaviour, your mood, everything about what happens during the day, how they behave is, not dictated but is very strongly influenced by how you behave.' HR professional

Relatively small gestures which enhance the relationship between teacher and management are very much appreciated. Some school leaders described how they managed training days flexibly, incorporating an hour here and there into the working week, so that teachers could have a day off for Christmas shopping, or slightly longer holidays. Other examples we heard about were teachers being permitted to take time out to attend their own child's school play,

or teachers being allowed or even encouraged to take their PPA time[2] at home, giving them some flexibility about how they manage their time. In these schools, there is more likely to be a relationship of mutual trust. Teachers who feel trusted will give more, be more creative, and ultimately be better teachers than those who feel scrutinised, criticised and micromanaged.

We wrote in our first briefing about the isolation which teachers can feel, especially if their school or college does not have a staff room or work areas where teachers can meet together. Some teachers told us they believe their institutions have deliberately dispensed with areas where staff can congregate, so that teachers cannot share and compare their experiences, and potentially organise together. It is very easy for teachers to see the world as it is from their individual perspective, or within their school, and think that is all there is. Sharing experiences, both within their own schools and beyond, means that teachers are less likely to feel isolated, or to succumb to the notion that what they are experiencing is particular to them and – worst of all – their fault. Teachers and unions commonly report a perception of a divide and conquer strategy operating within an institution; schools and colleges which, on the contrary, encourage and promote a sense of community and of team spirit enhance wellbeing. Happy teachers do a better job, and leaders who realise this will reap the rewards from their staff.

---

[2] Planning, preparation and assessment time, equating to 10% of a teacher's allocated teaching hours.

Good leadership: enabling teachers to do their job

Another important factor to highlight is the significance of the role of senior leaders in relation to their staff on the one hand and to external agencies on the other. Some leaders or managers were seen by participants as metaphorically cascading down and passing on the stresses of Ofsted and government reform to their staff, and/or using those external levers explicitly to put pressure on their staff. Other leaders were perceived to behave more like a door opening both ways, facing external agencies with compliance, at least looking as though they are ticking all the boxes, whilst shielding classroom teachers from any ill effects of those pressures and allowing teachers to address the school's priorities and exercise their professional judgement.

'In terms of supporting staff, it's very important for my staff to know that I've got their back... So, teachers, I think, teachers have to trust you, the leader. You do have to have your teachers' backs. And I think if the teachers know that you're there, that you will really help them and you, you can prevent an awful lot of issues that can create stress for a teacher.' Primary headteacher

'The secret of good leadership and good management is to forget about yourself.' HR professional

'...It's about being really well-organised, having a really well-organised school, where you're not wasting silly amounts of time. Leadership is about looking at what needs to be developed and not changing things for the sake of it. And I'm a great believer: if it isn't broken, don't fix it.' Primary headteacher

In particular, some leaders recognise that change for change's sake rocks the boat, and causes extra workload and extra anxiety, and are at pains to deflect multiple initiatives before they hit staff. These kinds of leaders are highly valued and appreciated by teachers: this kind of practice, where leaders prioritise their own staff and students, and which may involve being quietly subversive, was described as "flying under the radar". As one participant put it, "Good leaders forget about themselves".

There was a view that governors could possibly do more to monitor the situation within school. A critical mass of governors could hold Senior Leadership Teams to account if they see something happening which does not seem right, for example asking pertinent questions about why teachers are leaving. In addition, teachers may not know what their rights are, in terms of relevant protections and regulations such as Health and Safety legislation and the Equality Act 2010. This lack of awareness may be exploited by managers. It is in teachers' interests to be well informed, and to seek support if they feel something is not right. Trained union representatives in each school are essential, and our participants felt that more teachers should volunteer for these roles for the sake of the profession.

Conclusion

Many of the findings seem straightforward: good leadership and a supportive culture helps teachers feel valued at work, and able to exercise their professional judgement. In turn, this is likely to have positive effects on well-being and mental health of teachers. Participants felt that sharing good practice should be a much greater priority, and that the culture needs to change within the profession, moving from the current situation where it is common for unions and other stakeholders only to become involved once there is a problem, to one where Senior Leadership Teams engage in open and continuous dialogue with teaching unions and others. There is already an abundance of useful information developed by unions representing classroom teachers (e.g. the NEU and the NASUWT) and those for school and college leaders (ASCL and NAHT), on promoting and embedding good practice. There is great potential for these excellent resources to be used more extensively and for trades unions to be a positive vehicle for change.

References

Hanks, J., Mathieson, R. and Forde, C. (2020) *Well Being and Burnout in Teaching: Understanding the Issues, Briefing 1*, University of Leeds, available at: https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/103/2020/04/Well-being-and-burnout-in-teaching_understanding-the-issues_final-version.pdf